



Dharmarajika Buddhist Vihara: A Model of Interfaith Unity

Romana Papri

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Pali & Buddhist Studies, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Abstract

Dharmarajika, a Buddhist monastery, which was initially established in 1960, Dhaka, Bangladesh is a center for social, cultural, and religious activities. It is the city's first Buddhist monastery that actively promotes peace and interfaith harmony by opening themselves up to all religions through charity works, orphanage, healthcare, education, and distribution of iftar meals to the underprivileged Muslims during Ramadan. The monastery was also an active participant during Bangladesh's liberation war through acts such as providing shelter and care to the war-affected. Dharmarajika puts community service and cultural programs as a means in fostering unity, respect, and compassion among the diverse religious groups. This article describes how the monastery's activity is contributing to social welfare and interfaith understanding, underscoring its impact in building a tolerant and cohesive society.

Keywords: Buddhist monastery, Interfaith harmony, Liberation war, Community service, Cultural programs.

Introduction:

In an era of rising religious polarization, Dharmarajika stands as a counter-narrative. It's a place that embraces diversity while remaining deeply rooted in Buddhist tradition. The monastery at its establishment was under the lead of Bisudhananda Mahathero (1909-1994), and later on after his passing Suddhananda Mahathero (1933-2020) took the helm, and finally is now led by Buddhapriya Mahathero. It was originally established in 1960 by the late Bisuddhananda Mahathero and has slowly expanded and become a central hub for multicultural and religious activities that has made our society more tolerant and united (S. Barua, 1995; Barua, 2006). As a pioneering project in the Dhaka region, undertaken by the Bangladesh Bouddha Kristi Prachar Sangha (BBKPS), Dharmarajika was created in hopes of reviving the declining Buddhist culture (Barua, 2006). Barua (2006) also describes how the monastery had ties to Emperor Ashoka's workings and is also named after a stupa built under the orders of him. During Bangladesh's Liberation war, the monastery actively participated through acts such as providing shelter and care to the war-torn people (J. L. Barua, 2006; J. Barua, 2017). S. Barua (1995) & Barua (2006) have also talked how at present the monastery has undertaken many initiatives to promote interfaith harmony and create a cohesive and inclusive society. Among its deeds are the creation of an orphanage, free healthcare and education, educational institutions, printing place, distribution of iftar during Ramadan to the underprivileged Muslims and so on. The monastery is not biased

and actively supports people of all diversity through charity works and community service-thus being an ideal model for interfaith unity.

Background & Heritage:

The late Bishudhananda Mahathero had been trying to establish a place to rekindle Theravada Buddhist culture from a long time ago until Dharmajika's creation in 1960, fulfilling his long-cherished dream (S. Barua, 1995; Barua 2006). J. L. Barua (1999) and D. P. Barua (2006) have narrated that Bisudhananda Mahathero had to undertake innumerable pains in order to successfully acquire 4.5 acres of land in two phases from the government, which was originally part of a zamindar's garden. At first called Dhaka Buddhist Monastery and later on renamed Dharmarajika in honor of Emperor Ashoka's ancient stupas, especially the one located at the historic Dhamrai site called Dharmarajika stupa (Barua, 1999; Barua, 2006). Barua (2006) further narrated that after its inauguration the monastery rapidly expanded to its current enriched state. From a Pali college to even a technical school and kindergarten, Dharmarajika expanded into all sectors. Even besides these a fine-arts academy, clinic, literary society, orphanage and international prayer hall have been opened up in subsequent decades (S. Barua, 1995; Barua, 1999; Barua, 2006). In enrichment of the monastery's heritage Royal patronage holds a major share such as how in 1962 the King and Queen of Thailand visited and the monastery was inaugurated by the King Bhumibol (Barua, 1999). A ten-feet tall Buddha statue was gifted by them and in later years Japan has also gifted a subsequent statue (Barua, 1999). Barua (1995) has also stated that in 1982, relics of esteemed 10th century scholar Atisha Dipankar was ceremonially installed, adding to the monastery's rich heritage. Among the artifacts it holds, there exists a sacred tree linked to Gautama Buddha's enlightenment further increasing the monastery's deep heritage (S. Barua, 1995; J. L. Barua, 1999).

Literature Review:

The Dharmarajika Buddhist Vihara in Dhaka has been recognized as a pioneering institution for reviving the declining Theravada Buddhist culture and to actively spread interfaith harmony through its undertaken works (Barua, 2006). Barua (2006) has further stated that after its initial establishment in 1951 the monastery was officially relocated to Komolapur in 1960 marking its actual beginning. Post 1960 the complex gradually expanded, adding a Pali college, orphanage, school, and a technical institution too, which in turn further showcases the monastery's community service and social welfare attempts (Barua, 2006). The Vihara's outreach to different religious communities is especially noticeable through how they distribute iftar meals in Ramadan to the needy Muslims, make it possible for the orphaned children to receive education despite their diverse background, and provide healthcare and practical skills to all (Papri, 2022; Barua, 2024). The monastery's actions are slowly but surely bridging the division religion normally brings, highlighting a stark contrast to the current unrest in society between different religious groups and are immensely helpful in building a peaceful, tolerant, and cohesive society (Barua, D.K., Barua, S.K., & Barua, A., 2018). While many Buddhist institutions limit their approach to interfaith unity, Dharmarajika continues with a sustained effort through their various seminars, symposiums, and workshops that include participants from all faith backgrounds while also presenting that the monastery's operations are not just limited to Ramadan and is rather a multifaceted approach (Papri, 2022; Barua, 2024). Despite these achievements, the Buddhist led Institutions in Bangladesh face financial

challenges that may limit its sustainability to continue working for interfaith unity, but even then, it is the closest to an ideal model for religious plurality in a predominantly Muslim country.

Research Objectives:

The primary objective of this research is to examine the role of the Dharmarajik Buddhist Vihara in promoting interfaith harmony and religious tolerance within the context of Bangladesh's multicultural society. It also seeks to analyze the various social, cultural, and religious initiatives undertaken by the Vihara that contribute to fostering peaceful coexistence among different religious communities. Furthermore, the study aims to explore how the Vihara's efforts toward interfaith unity are represented in media and public discourse, providing insight into its broader societal impact.

Research Method:

This article uses qualitative content analysis to explore how the Dharmarajik Buddhist Vihara promotes interfaith unity in Bangladesh. Content analysis has been used for its ability to systematically interpret textual data and identify recurring themes related to religious harmony (Krippendorff, 2018). The collected data sources include both primary and secondary sources such as institutional publications, books and academic articles from 1995 to 2025. These were chosen based on relevance and credibility, and analyzed thematically to identify patterns such as interfaith outreach, tolerance, and public perception (Mayring, 2014). Both explicit content such as the iftar distribution and implicit messages such as civic responsibility was examined. Language, tone, and frequency of references to interfaith efforts were analyzed to assess how the Vihara is portrayed (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). To ensure validity, findings were cross-checked across different source types (Bowen, 2009).

Community Outreach & Social Welfare:

The Dharmarajika Buddhist Monastery in Dhaka exemplifies a holistic approach to social welfare, combining religious compassion with civic engagement. Its efforts span across several dimensions.

Ramadan Iftar Program:

According to Papri (2022) & Barua (2024), since 2013 the monastery has distributed iftar to approximately 300-500 underprivileged Muslims every evening during the month of Ramadan. These iftar included traditional Bangladeshi meals such as lentil, puffed rice, dates, fried snacks, and sweets. This program aims to build goodwill and communal trust with the final goal of creating an environment of mutual respect. Here below is the picture of their Iftar distribution program:



Pic: Poor Muslims standing in line collecting iftar, picture retrieved from:
<https://chandpurtimes.com> 28 June 2015

Orphanages & Educational Initiatives:

Initially with no plans of establishing an orphanage, Suddhananda Mahathero had to take in some children by the request of a Red Cross representative during the liberation war period (Barua, D. K., Barua S. K., & Barua, 2018). From caring for those children, Mahathero decided to open an orphanage to take in more such unfortunate lives and at present the monastery provides shelter, education and boarding to over 1000 children of diverse backgrounds ranging from kindergarten to even college level education, the monastery is now able to foster an inclusive and nurturing environment (Barua, D. K., Barua S. K., & Barua, 2018).

Medical & Basic Needs Service:

Barua, D. K., Barua S. K., and Barua (2018) has also told that among the monastery's many establishments the Dharmarajika Nikko Niyano clinic plays a vital role in delivering healthcare across general, pediatric, and maternal services irrelevant of caste, religion, and background while also having options for subsidized or even free treatment depending on the financial situation of the patient.

Water Aid:

From its opening till now, the monastery has stood on the people's side indifferent of their religious background or social standpoint and was originally built to revive the declining Theravada Buddhist culture, and at present it has become much more (Barua, 2006). It is a beacon of interfaith harmony and to uphold their vows faithfully various initiatives have been undertaken by the monastery like provisions, shelter, education, community service, healthcare, and even water aid too is one of their initiatives (D. K. Barua, S.K. Barua, & A. Barua, 2018). D. K. Barua, S.K. Barua, and A. Barua (2018) has further described that, to tackle times when clean water was hard to found the monastery built a deep tube well in its premises and this system is now able to easily provide free and safe drinking water to hundreds of people regularly. By offering access to basic necessities like clean water, Dharmarajika not only supports physical well-being but also upholds values of human dignity and social justice, serving as an example of how religious institutions can contribute meaningfully to sustainable community development and interfaith harmony (D. K. Barua, S.K. Barua, & A. Barua, 2018).

Aid During Corona Pandemic:

During the period when everywhere was filled with fear and mistrust of others, Dharmarajika took the helm by continuing their human-welfare programs through aid and other similar approaches. In the Basabo locality food was distributed to the poor and distressed people during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even when people were restricted to home stay the monastery, under Buddhapriya Mahathero's leadership continued their humanitarian acts through their various branches such as youth branch, women branch etc. Down below is a picture showcasing their pandemic time aid giving:



Pic: Relief distributions at Dharmarajika Buddhist Monastery during the corona period, July 31, 2021. Retrieved from Internet

Interfaith Engagement and Social Welfare Initiatives:

In an interview with Dharmananda Mahathero, a series of topics have been discussed and Mahathero has shared much about the monastery's workings ranging from interfaith engagement to social welfare initiatives. Mahathero has narrated that Dharmarajika Buddhist Monastery plays a key role in promoting interfaith harmony and social welfare through its charity driven programs that includes the distribution of iftar meals to underprivileged Muslims during Ramadan, underscoring the monastery's commitment to building goodwill and fostering unity among diverse communities. The monastery at the same time runs an orphanage, providing shelter, education, and care for children of all religious backgrounds, while also offering healthcare services to people regardless of faith. In addition to these initiatives, Dharmarajika hosts interfaith dialogues, youth programs, and seminars with goals of promoting mutual understanding and respect. These activities help bridge religious divides, creating spaces for diverse groups to come together and work together. Through these efforts, the monastery contributes significantly to Bangladesh's social fabric, fostering peaceful coexistence and reinforcing its role as a model for interfaith unity and community service in a religiously diverse society.

Broader Impact on Peace & Identity:

The interfaith initiative at Dharmarajika Buddhist Monastery in Dhaka has significantly transformed both communal peace and collective identity in Bangladesh starting from 2013, when the Venerable Suddhananda Mahathero took over the monastery and a new program that is the distribution of simple Iftar meals during the month of Ramadan to the not well-off Muslims to breakfast, underscoring the monastery's impact on Interfaith harmony (Papri, 2022; Barua, 2024). The monastery's stance shines as counter-narrative to religious tensions and minority targeted violence by extending compassion beyond doctrinal boundaries, Buddhist monks embody a lived form of interfaith solidarity, helping to rewrite entrenched perceptions of "otherness" and forge a shared civic identity rooted in mutual respect (D. K. Barua, S.K. Barua, & A. Barua, 2018). The monastery also gives out Atish Dipankar gold medal and Bisudhananda Peace gold medal to prominent figures related to human welfare, peacebuilding, and interfaith harmony irrespective of their backgrounds (Barua, 2017). D. K. Barua, S.K. Barua, and A. Barua (2018) have moreover described that the monastery's taken steps are not just limited to alleviating hunger but also to bridge the gap between the Buddhist and the Muslims, thus unlike other institutions the monastery's takes a face-to-face approach instead of a closed off one to establish a close bond with the Muslims. As monks and Muslim neighbors engage in routine cooperation, the community internalizes principles of empathy and nonviolence,

embedding them within everyday culture and identity, constantly reinforcing the monastery's image as not just an institution limited to a particular religion but as a place of universal welfare (D. K. Barua, S.K. Barua, & A. Barua, 2018). Through interreligious activity and inclusive community service, Dharmarajika is playing a major role in building a long-lasting peace at the heart of Bangladesh (The National Funeral Committee of His Holiness Sanghanayaka Suddhananda Mahathera, 2022).

Festivals & Participation:

Barua (1995) has described that the Dharmarajik Buddhist Vihara is a central figure for celebrating major Buddhist festivals that captivate not only the local Buddhist community but also people from diverse religious backgrounds. The most significant of them is Buddha Purnima, which commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and the passing of Gautam Buddha (Barua, 1995). Its contents range from devotional chanting, processions, community gatherings, seminars and to symposiums, thus successfully drawing hundreds to over a thousand participants (Barua, 1995). Barua (1995) has further narrated that the Vihara also hosts the Kathin Chibor Dan ceremony – which is a traditional robe offering, marking the end of the three-month monastic Lent. This ritual sees active participation from both monks and lay devotees, emphasizing the community's dedication to Buddhist practices (Barua, 1995). Barua (1995) has additionally talked about Parbarona Purnima, which is also known as the Festival of Lights and is another significant event that is celebrated with lantern releases, symbolizing the dispelling of darkness and ignorance, attracting many attendees who join in the vibrant nighttime observances. On the contrary Barua (2024) has expressed that even outside the scope of Buddhist-specific events the Vihara also engages in activities like the distribution of iftar meals in the holy month of Ramadan to the not well-off Muslim population of its vicinity which is in the hundreds, underscoring its attempts at fostering goodwill and communal harmony. As a whole, the festivals and related community activities at Dharmarajik Buddhist Vihara emphasizes its role as a spiritual center that promotes religious inclusivity and social cohesion in a society that is overly polarized and fragmented (Barua, D.K., Barua, S.K., & Barua, A., 2018).

Dharmarajika's Role in 1971 Liberation War:

From as early as the Liberation War of Bangladesh, Dharmarajika under the leadership of Bisudhananda Mahathero and support of monk Suddhananda along with many prominent figures has worked tirelessly not just as a spiritual support but also as a direct participant through sheltering, providing aid and care to displaced people and chances to the orphaned with education, practical skills, and a place to call home after having nothing left to rely on (Barua, D.K., Barua, S. K., Barua, A., 2018; The National Funeral Committee of His Holiness Sanghanayaka Suddhananda Mahathera, 2022). They've lent their hands not just to the Buddhists but also to the Hindu and Christian minorities along with the majority Muslims, which as a result underscores the monastery's continuous efforts in establishing a peaceful, cohesive, and tolerant society and as an addition, spreading interfaith unity (Barua, J. L., 1999; Barua, J., 2017). S. Barua (1995) and J. L. Barua (2006) have highlighted that over time, the monastery expanded its efforts by launching a high school, vocational training centers, a kindergarten, and a clinic, benefiting thousands from different communities. The monastery's contributions worked as a remedy for post-war wounds and a medium for rebuilding our country anew and its ongoing programs still

continue to serve the nation through education, healthcare, and cultural support (Barua, 1999, 2006).

Conclusion:

The Dharmarajika Buddhist Monastery is but a mere place for religious preaching and in fact its significance is much deeper in being a place that has bridged the polarization and fragmentation the current society is going through. Since its beginning in 1960, it has worked hard to promote peace, kindness, and unity among people of different faiths in Bangladesh. Through its programs like the orphanage, free healthcare, education, and the special Ramadan iftar meals, the monastery helps many people regardless of their backgrounds. Its role during the 1971 Liberation War showed how it supports those in need during difficult times. By encouraging respect and cooperation between communities, Dharmarajika stands as a strong example of harmony and social care. It continues to bring people together, preserve culture, and build a peaceful society.

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